DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 875 JC 990 589

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TITLE What Makes a Department Chair Effective with Faculty and Students?
PUB DATE 1996-00-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Effectiveness; Administrator Qualifications; Administrator Responsibility; Collegiality; *Department Heads; Faculty; Higher Education; *Instructional Leadership; *Leadership Qualities; Leadership Responsibility; Teachers

ABSTRACT

This report discusses the attributes of an effective department chair, including the characteristics of the individual and how the chair enhances the opportunity of each faculty member to do his or her job best. The roles of the department chair are many. Each role that a chair plays must in some way advance excellence in teaching and learning. This paper addresses the related issues and gives some insight into how to become an effective department chair. The ability to listen is a top quality in department chairs. Other characteristics include: the ability to transmit information in an open, honest, and positive manner, take responsibility for mistakes, be unselfish with sharing success, and be diplomatic in handling sensitive issues. Ways that department chairs can improve the ability of faculty to enhance teaching and learning follow patterns that come from allowing academic and professional freedom in the classroom, fostering faculty development activities, supporting faculty initiatives, and providing resources, guidance, and assistance when necessary. The report concludes with 15 ways that department chairs can promote effective teaching within their areas and a list of activities for the department chair to use with faculty. (VWC)

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"What makes a department chair effective with faculty and students?"

ED 433 875

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Fall, 1996
EDH 6938

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In attempting to derive the attributes of an effective department chair, many intriguing questions arose. The questions centered around the characteristics of the individual and how the chair enhances the opportunity of each faculty member to do his or her job best. The roles of the department chair are many. The "hats" of this individual include: "master teacher, colleague, administrator, friend, budget monitor, problem solver, committee member, counselor, change agent (Lamb)." Each role that a chair plays must in some way advance excellence in teaching and learning. This paper shall address the related issues and give some insight into how to become an effective department chair.

The department chair should be ready, willing, and able to handle numerous duties in a method that encourages participation and sharing openly (Murray). Chairs must be an advocate and facilitator for faculty wishes and needs. Since many department chairs have not been out of teaching for very long, they are usually more sympathetic and empathetic to faculty concerns than higher level administrators (Gmelch and Houchen). The effective department chair must always be alert and equipped to foster departmental growth, dedication of colleagues, and be able to handle daily problems with students, faculty, staff, and other administrators. The (Murray) study concurred that faculty want their chairs to have strong "human relations and interpersonal qualities." In my dealings with department chairs, the ability to listen is a top quality.

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Other characteristics of an effective department chair include the ability to transmit information in an open, honest, and positive manner, take responsibility for mistakes, be unselfish with sharing success, and be diplomatic in handling sensitive issues. The chair must always be seen as a positive, unstressed, and nurturing figure who can turn weaknesses into "future strengths (Lamb)." The department chair has to be more than a "paper pusher" or a "suit" that only appears to when bad news is afoot. The chair should be visible, accessible, and willing to answer questions from anyone and at anytime. The leader of the department must be able to let others take charge within their areas of interest. As much as the faculty want control, the chair still must have the resolve to stand his or her ground at times.

The department chair should be more than a mere coordinator or manager, but not quite the complete transformational leader with a distinct and unwavering vision, a commanding presence, and great charisma. The successful chair shifts around in the middle (Murray). The role of the department chair in many instances in not well defined. Many unwanted tasks and chores are given to the chair. This often can lead to confusion and disorganization at the departmental level because of too many items to be tended. The department chair will frequently end up to doing jobs that clerical staff could just as easily, such as scheduling classes and inventories.

Ways that department chairs can improve the ability of faculty to enhance teaching and learning follow patterns that come from allowing academic and professional freedom in the classroom, fostering faculty development activities, supporting faculty initiatives, and providing resources, guidance, and assistance when necessary. Goals set for the department must be realistic,

prioritized, developed with faculty, and involve the entire department (Mott). If the chair does not allow for cooperation with the faculty in the decision making process, then failure to meet objectives is all but assured. Mott suggests the establishment of departmental advisory committees for just this reason. A use for the advisory committee may be to decide not only what the department should be doing, but how to reward those who excel within the department. (Litecky) suggests release time, small grants, and stipends be provided, rather than linking success to evaluations or promotions.

Feedback is an important part of being effective as a department chair. When students make complaints or give praise about classroom teaching, the chair should always let that student know the outcome of the grievance (compliment) as soon as possible. Faculty should be notified when their names come up in conversation, either informally or formally (Lamb). This can add to the morale of the students and faculty. If the department chair shows concern for the views of others and is open, then respect levels are heightened.

The following list consists of ways that department chairs can better perform their many duties and keep a department on track.

According to Bill Lamb of Johnson County Community College in Kansas, there are sixteen ways that department chairs can promote effective teaching within their areas. Those ways are:

1. Make teaching as meaningful as possible,
2. Be moderate in the direction given to faculty,
3. Help faculty set and attain realistic goals,

4. Use praise freely,

5. Transmit respect for each individual,

6. Build pride in each person's own accomplishments, 7. Capitalize on each person's strength,

8. Encourage self-competition,

9. Promote independence and responsibility,

10. Recognize sincere effort even if the end product is not the greatest,

11. Give feedback as soon as possible,

12. Don't ignore areas of dissatisfaction,

13. Keep the communication channels open,

14. Stress quality rather than quantity,

15. Use a variety of approaches from active domination to reflective support, and 16. Provide a good model to be imitated. Show them that you are human too.

Larry Litecky gave a list of activities (lessons) for the department chair to use with (on) faculty. The department chair could do any combination of the following on a regular basis to instill department pride, unity, and success. The activities are:

1. Hold "Great Teacher Workshops" where faculty and staff can discuss methodology and classroom challenges in an open and honest forum,

2. Conduct "Faculty development days" that review courses, goals, objectives, and student success patterns in hopes of developing greater intellectual skills among faculty,

3. Devote part of department meetings to the discussion of case studies relating to actual teaching problems and situations,

4. Form a "grants team" within the department to enhance creativity and innovation in the department,

5. Appoint a senior faculty as a "teaching specialist" for the purpose of assisting faculty in keeping current with new and alternative teaching and evaluation strategies, and

6. Encouraging the creation of interest groups that could discuss anything that comes to mind that has a remote possibility of affecting teaching and learning.

The department chair must be willing to make the job of educating students "easier" by "opening doors of opportunity" for faculty to develop and revise teaching strategies and methods in a non-hostile environment (Gmelch and Houchen). Through strategic planning, that is coordinated with the faculty, a chair can make the department stronger and more effective on all levels. The chair cannot and should not try to go it alone. Too much is at stake for the leader of the department to try to be a hero. The entire department must have some degree of ownership in the future of their area. The chair has to keep everyone together, focused, and involved in advancing effective teaching and learning.

Emanating Questions:

1. How much training is usually given to most new department chairs before they take over?

2. Is the evaluation of department chair effectiveness successful in creating better chairs?

3. Would it be beneficial for a community college to have an assistant department chair (not an administrative assistant or secretary) in the organization chart?

4. How long is should a department chair stay in that position?

5. What can faculty do to get a department chair to become more effective?

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